Old Miami disappears bit by bit

HOWARD KLEINBERG
SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR

ARCHITECT Alfred Browning Parker advised me several weeks ago that if I wanted to see another part of old Miami disappearing, I should go to an upper garage level of downtown's AmeriFirst Building and look down on Flagler Street from there.

From Level 6 I saw a demolition crew working near what remained of the arched stage of the Paramount Theater, obscured since 1978 as part of a boutique mall, Galleria International. Now that remnant is gone — and so are a lot of memories.

This isn't meant to protest the destruction of yet another historic site in Miami. There are enough others to scream about, such as the recent despicable demolition of the Algonquin apartments and gutting of the Priscilla apartments on Biscayne Boulevard.

The Paramount, built in 1921 as the Fairfax Theater, had been so structurally altered over the years that it was unrecognizable — until remnants of the original interior were exposed during demolition.

What struck me most was the dramatic change that the entire block of East Flagler Street, between Second and Third avenues, has undergone during my years. The north side of the street was where I knew three movie theaters: the Florida, the Paramount, and the Town. They all are gone, the Paramount and the Town sites and the buildings around them demolished for a new two-story retail shopping center. One of those structures was the Calumet Building, on the corner of East Flagler and Third.

The five-story Calumet housed the Turf Exchange Bar, a place, I was told as a youngster, not for the prim or timid. It was a block of memories, and not just the movie theaters. There was Sloppy Joe's hot dog stand, the Paramount coffee shop, the Ponce de Leon Hotel, the apartments over the Paramount.

Diagonally southeast, on Southeast Third Avenue, was Jahn's Magic Shop and a carpet golf course with pinball machines that I wasn't old enough to play but did. Between Third and Second avenues, on the south side of East Flagler, stood the old First Presbyterian Church, its construction funded by Henry Flagler himself. The church relocated in 1950 to Brickell Avenue.

Not everything I knew is gone, however. There is one nostalgic holdout on the south side of that block: Walgreen Drugs, where kids used to hang out in the days when hanging out didn't seem so menacing. To older-timers of Miami, Walgreen's is a Johnny-come-lately, built in 1937. Miami pioneers will recall that corner as being the 1913 site of the first Miami Women's Club. In 1923 it housed the Tatum Brothers real estate company. Walgreen's came 14 years later.

On the north side of the street, the Rex Theater was renamed the Florida Theater in 1948. Before the Rex, the Hippodrome Theater was there beginning in 1917. In 1899 it was the site of Dr. James Jackson's house and surgery practice.

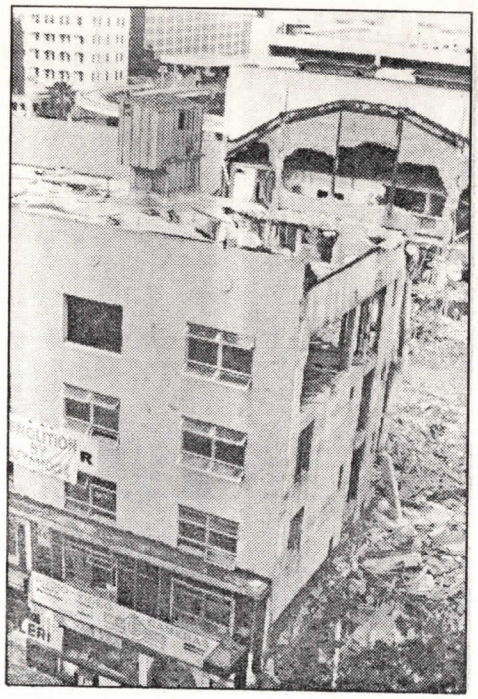
The Town Theater, built in 1938, was next door to the Paramount. You stood in the street, facing both, and made your choice off the marquees. The Paramount was a first-run theater, while the Town ran second-run movies.

I don't recall how the Town died. Built into the Calumet Building, it went *poof!* in the '70s to become a small mall of shops, I believe. The Town originally was the Miami Theater until Wometco built a new Miami Theater a block west in 1947.

When the Paramount opened as the Fairfax in January 1921, it presented stage shows as well as motion pictures. In its dying days, the once-proud theater suffered the indignity of being an X-rated and on-stage skin show theater under Leroy Griffin. In December 1972 performers were arrested in several raids and charged with disorderly conduct and exposing themselves.

The Paramount soon was to shut again. It remained in mothballs until Galleria International turned it into a network of shops.

The dramatic changes on both sides of that street are but a continuing evolution of Miami's downtown business district. Memories are fleeting. Look now, because what you saw there yesterday may not be there tomorrow.



Paramount Theater's arched stage

. . . exposed during demolition